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ABSTRACT

The relationship between parenthood and sex role attitudes and aspirations was examined with the use of data from a longitudinal study of a single high school graduating class. Findings indicated that parents were more traditional than nonparents, partly because parents were more traditional before having a child. It was also found that the transition to parenthood exerted effects that varied according to the color and marital status of the respondent. For white married respondents, becoming a parent had a clear and traditionalizing influence, but for unwed black women, the opposite effect was observed; for these women, parenthood led to more egalitarian attitudes. This pattern was interpreted to reflect costs and benefits of traditional sex roles for different groups in different situations. Appended are 34 references. (Author/SKC)

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PARENTHOOD AND THE ATTITUDES OF YOUNG ADULTS*

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Using data from a recent longitudinal study of a single high school graduating class, we examine the relationship between parenthood and sex role attitudes and aspirations. We find that parents are more traditional than nonparents, partly because parents were more traditional prior to having a child. Controlling on earlier traditional-egalitarian orientations, the transition to parenthood exerts effects that vary by the color and marital status of the respondent. For white married respondents, becoming a parent has a clear and traditionalizing influence. For unwed black women, the opposite effect is observed—parenthood leads to more egalitarian attitudes. We interpret this pattern to reflect costs and benefits of traditional sex roles to different groups under different situations.

INTRODUCTION

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed profound social change in the family, especially in the roles of men and women. Women entered the labor force in unprecedented numbers, leading some to write an epitaph for the traditional male breadwinner role (see Bernard 1981; Ehrenreich 1983). Survey research provides clear evidence of more egalitarian attitudes toward family and labor force gender roles (Mason, Czajka, and Arber 1976; Cherlin and Walters 1981), together with increasing acceptance of divorce, permanent nonmarriage, and childlessness (Thornton and Freedman 1982). Consistent with these changes, many American men and women have delayed marriage and parenthood to an extent previously observed only during the Great Depression (Rindfuss, Morgan, and Swicegood 1988). Bloom (1982) estimates that as many as 30 percent of white women born in the early to mid-1950s (women currently in their thirties) will never bear a child.

In this paper, we focus on the relationship between the transition to parenthood and sex role attitudes within a cohort undergoing the transition to adulthood—members of the high school class of 1972. We develop and test hypotheses about the situation in which the first birth leads to more traditional sex roles.

INFLUENCE OF SEX ROLE ATTITUDES ON TIMING OF PARENTHOOD

The American social context provides substantial flexibility in timing the transition to parenthood. Individuals tend to fit parenthood around other demanding roles and in a way that meshes with their stated goals, life-style preference, and sex role orientations (Rindfuss et al. 1988). Those with a traditional sex role orientation are, almost by definition, more focused on the family than those with nontraditional views, and so might see parenthood as an appropriate transition for early adulthood. They more often anticipate a division of labor where the male is the primary breadwinner and the woman the primary caretaker than do individuals with more nontraditional views of sex roles. Such an anticipated division of labor lowers the perceived costs of childbearing and increases the expected rewards. In this schema, sex role orientations act as a crucial mediating variable between background variables, earlier life course experience, and decisions about timing of parenthood.

In partial support of this view, Waite, Haggstrom, and Kanouse (1986) find that young women who become parents differ substantially prior to pregnancy from their counterparts who remain childless; they are less oriented toward work, fewer plan a professional career, more define themselves as homemakers, and more expect to be homemakers at age 30.

On the other hand, some will question the impact of sex role attitudes on first birth timing. Delayed childbearing is not a new strategy, and aggregate trends seem to be driven by strong period factors such as wars and economic cycles

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(Butz and Ward 1979; Rindfuss et al. 1988). Thus, as Modell, Furstenberg, and Strong (1978) have argued for earlier periods, obstacles to family formation (such as difficulty finding a spouse or difficulty obtaining sufficient resources) may be more important determinants of fertility timing. Attitudes and values may be better explained as a rationalization of past behavior or current status (see Thornton 1985).

INFLUENCE OF PARENTHOOD TIMING ON SEX ROLES

Traditional views of sex roles represent acceptance of familial allocation of men's productive efforts toward the labor market and women's toward the home, with relatively little overlap. Individuals adopt or alter these views if they have something to gain from doing so. As Davis and van den Oever (1982, p. 509) argue, "People need to feel *right* about what they do." They welcome an ideological position that "justifies their . . . behavior and morally reassures them."

Fertility delay could affect sex role attitudes by allowing for opportunities and experience that compete with childbearing. In this way delay leads to further delay as women invest in careers and as couples become accustomed to a childless life-style (Presser 1971; Mason 1974; Veevers 1979). Egalitarian sex roles and the importance of nonfamilial roles are embodied in this lifestyle. Alternatively, early childbearing limits nonfamilial roles for women and may make traditional orientations more appealing. In this way, parenthood and continued delay foster quite different life course trajectories which have quite different ideological rationales (Luker 1984).

Despite the appeal of this argument, parenthood may not consistently encourage a traditional orientation, and continued childlessness may not always foster more egalitarian views. As the life course literature increasingly acknowledges, the impact of important events like parenthood can have very different consequences depending upon the individual's characteristics, the process leading to parenthood or adjustments in its aftermath, and the broader social context in which it occurs (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1985). Attitude change could occur because new parents believe that traditional division of labor has something to offer that it did not have previously, in which case they would become more traditional, or that traditional roles either have not delivered or that nontraditional roles hold more benefits (see Ehrenreich 1984). Also, as noted above, attitude change could help rationalize new behaviors. So even if parenthood was unintended or fertility delay unavoidable, ideological change could make people feel better about these circumstances.

Since women generally assume disproportionate responsibility for children, they are likely to be affected by parenthood much more than men. Thus, an ascribed characteristic—gender—should condition parenthood effects. Further, there are a host of events preceding or following parenthood that could alter its influence. Varied experience as a mother or in nonfamilial roles could be important (see Gerson 1985; Spitze and Waite 1981). Married and unmarried women might respond quite differently to parenthood since it suggests quite different experiences. Single mothers, we expect, might be especially sensitive to the limitations and constraints embodied in traditional sex role orientations. Given the high incidence of out-of-wedlock childbearing among blacks and the difficulty faced by black men in earning a "family wage," black mothers may be especially sensitive to the benefits of nontraditional sex roles and the costs of traditional ones. Finally, women who plan for employment over the long run might see less advantage—and more disadvantage—in the traditional division of labor by sex, since these women will probably hold jobs and do the majority of work at home too (Pleck 1985).

DATA

The National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS), a large and detailed longitudinal study, has been described elsewhere (Haggstrom, Waite, Kanouse, and Blaschke 1984). Recently, it has been used by others to examine a range of issues focusing on young and mid adulthood, including the determinants and consequences of parenthood timing (Haggstrom et al. 1984; Rindfuss et al. 1988), marital disruption (Waite et al. 1985), and living arrangements (Goldscheider and DaVanzo 1986).

The first interview took place in the spring of 1972 when the panel members were seniors in high school. Follow-ups were conducted in the fall of 1973, 1974, 1976, and 1979. The data contain over 20,000 respondents—both male and female—with rich detail on early schooling and employment.[1] The 1979 follow-up contained a complete birth history, which allows for precise dating of the transition to parenthood for most respondents. The sample used in this analysis eliminates those who did not respond to the 1976 or 1979 interview, those with missing data on year of first birth, those whose sex could

[1] The NLS is a deeply stratified national probability sample. As we are not interested in national estimates but rather differences between parents and nonparents, we have used the unweighted data in analyses presented here.

Table 1. Sex Role, Life-Style, and Aspiration Measures from the High School Class of 1972 Data

Sex Role Items

A. A working mother of preschool children can be just as good as a mother who doesn't work

B. It is usually better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and the family

C. Young men should be encouraged to take jobs that are usually filled by women

D. Most women are just not interested in having big and important jobs

E. Many qualified women can't get good jobs; men with the same skills have much less trouble

F. Most women are happiest when they are making a home and caring for children

G. High school conselors should urge young women to train for jobs which are now held mainly by men

H. It is more important for a wife to help her husband than to have a career herself

I. Schools teach women to want the less important jobs

J. Men should be given first chance at most jobs because they have the primary responsibility for providing for a family

Personal Life-Style and Aspiration Measures

How important is each of the following in your life?

SUCCESS—Being successful in my line of work

TIME—Having leisure time to enjoy my own interests

FAMILY—Finding the right person to marry and having a happy family life

CLOSE—Living close to parents and relatives

How important do you think each of the following factors is in determining the kind of work you plan to be doing for most of your life?

PROMOTION—Opportunity for promotion and advancement in the long run

not be determined, and those pregnant at the 1976 interview date.[2]

The questions on sex role attitudes, life-style preferences, and career aspirations used in this analysis were asked in both the 1976 and 1979 interviews. Table 1 gives the wording of these items, which were all scored from 1, strongly agree, to 4, strongly disagree. The sex role items ask for broad assessments of what is "best." The referent for these question is not perfectly clear; some may have answered these items in terms of themselves or their family and others in terms of "most people" or the "average person." The referent for the life-style and aspiration questions is unambiguous: the respondent is asked how important these things are in his or her life.

If a series of items appears to measure a single construct, then use of a scale created from these items is superior to either picking one and analyzing it or using all the items separately. Use of a multi-item scale maximizes reliability and reduces the number of variables (Ware et al. 1980).

To see if the sex role items measured a single underlying dimension or more than one, and how well the individual items related to these dimensions, we assessed the scale properties of these items. Factor analysis showed that the items contained only one dimension; this result was confirmed by examination of item-scale correlations (Donald and Ware 1982). We then determined the relationship between each of the ten sex role items and the construct; our results showed that seven of the items, *A, B, D, F, G, H,* and *J,* formed a single scale with a coefficient of reliability of 0.74. Using the remaining items (which deal with job choices of men and women) we attempted to create a second measure. But these items fit poorly into a second scale and so were dropped from our analysis.[3]

A scale of sex role attitudes was created from the seven items by summing the responses as appropriate so that a low score indicated a nontraditional response and a high score a traditional one. The multi-item scale ranged from 7 (nontraditional responses to all items) to 28 (traditional responses to all items), with a mean of approximately 14 for women and 16 for men. The life-style questions were coded 1 to 3, where 1 is least important and 3 very important.

RESULTS

Our analysis focused on the following questions: (1) Do parents hold more traditional sex role

[2] The total number of cases, the number available for analysis, and the number excluded (by reason) are given below.

	Women	*Men*
Available for analysis (childless not pregnant)	6,204	6,783
Excluded from analysis		
(pregnant in 1976)	353	271
(not in 1979)	1,805	2,181
(parent by 1976)	2,627	1,618
(missing data 1st birth)	398	369
(in 1979, not in 1976)	118	231
Total	11,387	11,222

[3] This section of the analysis of scale characteristics of the sex role items was performed with ANLITH (analysis of item-trait homogeneity). The relationship between each item and the scale was corrected for overlap between the item and the scale, since the scale was the sum of all relevant items. An item-scale correlation corrected for overlap is the correlation between the item score and the sum of items in the scale other than the item in question. All items needed a corrected correlation of 0.30 or higher to be included in the final scale (Donald and Ware 1982).

attitudes than the childless? (2) If so, does this relationship hold, at least in part, because those who become parents have relatively traditional views prior to the first birth? (3) Does the transition to parenthood produce a shift toward a more traditional sex role orientation? (4) Does the effect of parenthood depend on the conditions under which it occurs? Specifically, is it the same for men and women, blacks and whites, married and the unmarried? We summarize answers to the first three questions and present in detail analyses relevant to the fourth.

Using a sample of nonparents as of 1976, comparison of 1979 responses shows that those who became parents since 1976 are clearly more traditional than those who remained childless. Compared to the childless, the mean score on the sex role scale (scored 7–28) is roughly one point and one and one-half points higher for male and female parents, respectively. These differences were about half as large for blacks as whites. Thus, our first question is clearly answered in the affirmative.

Do these differences predate the first birth? Again our analysis suggests that they do. The pattern of results described above mirrors differences that could have been observed in 1976. Those who would become parents in the 1976–79 period were more traditional initially.

Net of their greater traditionalism in 1976, do those who become parents become disproportionately more traditional? To answer this question we control for views at the earlier interview and predict later views, using an indicator variable for occurrence of the first birth as one of the predictors (Bohrnstedt 1969; Duan 1986). A set of potentially important control variables, such as parents' socioeconomic status and religion, was also controlled in this analysis. [4] In general, we find clear evidence that parenthood is associated with a conservative shift in sex role attitudes. The following analyses examine this general result in greater detail.

Does parenthood have consistent and pervasive effects? We argued that the response of black and white parents might be quite different because of the different social and economic context in which parenthood occurs in these two groups. One of the most obvious differences concerns marital status at the first birth; the majority of black first births occur to unmarried women, the majority of white first births to the married (Michael and Tuma 1985). To allow for variable parenthood effects by race and marital status, we created a parenthood/marriage typology: married parents, unmarried parents, married nonparents, and unmarried nonparents. We estimated models containing these contrasts and a set of controls (see note 4). Separate models were estimated for black and nonblack (mostly white) men and women.

Table 2 presents results that show clear parenthood effects on traditionalization of sex role attitudes, but only for certain subgroups. The effects we described above for all parents are restricted to white married parents. Note that the mean shift associated with parenthood is somewhat larger for married women than for married men, 0.47 compared to 0.34. White unmarried parents do not differ in sex role attitude changes from single or married nonparents.

For blacks a completely different pattern appears. Married mothers show no differences from single nonparents (the reference category). Nor do black married nonparents. But unmarried black mothers become substantially more nontraditional in their sex role attitudes. The coefficient for this group, −1.10, is the largest in any of the models we estimate. Among black men, parenthood—married or unmarried—has no significant effect.

The measures of importance of various work and family roles (lower panel of Table 2) show few effects for men that can be traced to the first birth. Married men, whether parents or not, increase the importance they attach to marriage and family (an effect that also appears for unmarried fathers). Married childless men become increasingly concerned with career success and promotion, and with the importance of leisure time—perhaps one of the reasons that they have avoided childbearing. For women, parenthood has stronger effects, decreasing the importance of career success, promotion, and leisure time, and increasing importance of marriage and family and living close to relatives. Although some of these effects appear for married childless women, these tend to be smaller than those for married mothers. Most of these effects appear only for whites, the same racial difference that we observed for sex role attitudes.

Finally, we tested the hypothesis that parenthood had larger effects on the sex role attitudes of women who expected to be housewives later in life than on those who expected to work. Although the models we tested showed the expected signs, the coefficients failed to reach

[4] This model also includes measures of the respondent's family background and demographic characteristics that others have found to affect sex role attitudes or timing of parenthood. These are race and ethnicity (Michael and Tuma 1985); parents' education; family socioeconomic status; whether the respondent's mother was employed when the respondent was a preschooler, in elementary school, and in high school (Heyns and Catsambis 1985); the respondent's religion; size of place; and region of residence. We also control for the respondent's curriculum track (vocation vs. other) and grades in high school, educational attainment by 1976, and marital status in that year.

Table 2. Net Effects of Becoming a Parent for the Married and Unmarried, by Color and Sex

		Men				Women			
		Parent		Nonparent		Parent		Nonparent	
Item	Color	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried
Sex role scale	Nonblack	.34**	.42	−.04	—	.47**	−.63	.10	—
	Black	.40	−.53	−.62	—	.02	−1.10**	−.14	—
Importance of									
Success	Nonblack	.02	−.03	.04**	—	.15**	−.13	−.06**	—
	Black	−.02	−.18	−.02	—	−.03	−.05	−.01	—
Promotion	Nonblack	.04	.14	.03*	—	−.10**	−.06	−.06**	—
	Black	.06	−.07	.11*	—	−.05	.08	.02	—
Leisure time	Nonblack	−.03	.07	.03*	—	−.07**	.02	.01	—
	Black	−.05	−.08	.05	—	.07	−.06	−.01	—
Marriage and family	Nonblack	.12**	.20*	.14**	—	.13**	−.08	.12**	—
	Black	.10	.01	.07	—	.06	.05	.03	—
Living close to relatives	Nonblack	.02	−.04	.01	—	.10**	−.03	.01	—
	Black	.01	−.16	−.14	—	−.08	−.05	.00	—

Note: Net of 1976 score and race/ethnicity, parents' education, rural residence, region SES, religion, mother's employment, high school grades and curriculum, and highest grade completed. Estimates are calculated for sex-color categories.

* Significant at the .05 level.

** Significant at the .01 level.

statistical significance despite the size of our sample. We conclude that if the effects of parenthood on sex role attitudes depend on women's long-run work plans, these effects are quite weak.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall these findings fit well with arguments developed earlier. Traditional divisions of labor by sex assign men's productive efforts to the labor market and women's toward the family. The 1950s were perhaps the high-water mark for such a division of labor in the United States and for the ideology that supported it. As Ehrenreich (1982) argues, men in the 1950s earned a "family wage," making a one-wage-earner strategy reasonable. Economic change (stable or declining real earnings [Bureau of Labor Statistics 1985]) and family change (rising divorce and illegitimacy [Cherlin 1981]) since the early 1970s have made such a division of labor impossible for large groups of Americans. These changed circumstances no doubt helped foster the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s (Davis and van den Oever 1983). In the 1970s, cohorts of men and women (like the one which we study) had no widely accepted ideology or preferred life course—neither a domestic nor a nondomestic choice was likely to go unchallenged. As Gerson (1985, p. 190) says, "To justify their own embattled positions, domestic and nondomestic women denigrated each other's choices . . . [and] few, if any, unambiguously legitimate paths [exist]."

Given this situation one should expect that sex role ideology might be tightly woven into the evolving life course. Value orientations are both a rationale for plans of action and a justification for past behavior—whether that behavior was a carefully planned course of action or a set of happenstances.

The arrival of a child requires substantial role adjustments, and the traditional one requires that the wife become the primary caretaker and the husband the primary breadwinner. To justify this role change or as the result of experiencing the adjusted roles, both male and female parents became more traditional in their orientations. This explanation fits well the results presented for white married respondents. This is the group for which traditional roles are most attractive. In contrast, single mothers might be especially sensitive to the limitations and constraints embodied in traditional sex role orientations. In fact, we find that single parenthood has quite different effects, pushing women toward more egalitarian positions. Likewise, black women's lower marriage and remarriage probabilities (Hoffman and Duncan 1986), the high incidence of out-of-wedlock childbearing among blacks, and the difficulty faced by black men in earning a family wage suggests that black mothers may be especially disposed toward nontraditional views. Our data support this hypothesis as well.

Analysis here focused on the approximate ages 22 to 25. Different effects of parenthood on sex role orientations and aspirations might be visible at other ages. For example, the traditionalizing effect of the first birth (which we observed for white married women) may erode over time, as children grow and become less demanding, at least physically. In contrast, we suspect that for

these women the traditional influence of parenthood has only begun to run its course. Being parents longer, having school-age children may perhaps exert a more traditional influence than having an infant. This expectation stresses that only with time will individuals need to reconcile fully their behavior and attitudes. Some women who have children at these ages (22–25), for instance, will be able to continue promising careers. Parenthood makes such goals more difficult to attain, but there is no reason why they must be abandoned at the young ages we analyze here.

We need to mention other cautions concerning generalizability. Our data came from a single high school cohort. Our sample excludes those who did not stay in school until their senior year, and we exclude from our analysis those who became parents prior to 1976 (roughly age 22). In short, our results must be replicated before we or others generalize them to other ages and times.

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